

Artist a storyteller at heart

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A

ll Laurie Anderson really wants to do is tell good stories.

It's a simple ambition, with age-old origins as innocent as fireside chats and stories around a campfire.

But Anderson takes the process well beyond.

In her modern-day quest to spin yarns, anything and everything is useful — language, altered voices, animation, video, audio, slides, science, poetry, humor, dance, high-tech electronics, politics, music and more.

"Because I work in so many different media, the threads are maybe a little bit hard to see," says Anderson by phone during a stop on her solo tour, which arrives Monday at the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor.

To wit, one instant she is a still photographer wandering throughout New York City at night collecting images of a decaying city.

The next she is an animator drawing silhouettes of airplanes, umbrellas, palm trees and television sets that float dreamlike across a movie screen.

Right now, she's working with Brian Eno and Peter Gabriel on a futuristic theme park called "Real World" to be

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Laurie Anderson Photo by ANNIE LIEBOWITZ

Performance artist Laurie Anderson, coming to Ann Arbor Monday, mixes a wide variety of media in her work.

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developed in Barcelona, Spain.

At her lower Manhattan loft, where she usually works alone and late at night, she tinkers with all types of technology. Among other things, she has built an amazing collection of modified violins. She plays one violin filled with water. Another has a bow fitted with prerecorded audiotape that she runs across a playback head on the bridge of the violin.

Once she took apart an electronic drum machine and wired it to parts of her body. She became a human drum set.

"One of my work methods is to turn on all the equipment in my loft and just move around and see what happens," says the workaholic artist in her new book, "Stories from the Nerve Bible: A Retrospective 1972-1992" (Harper Perennial, \$30).

From such disparate elements Anderson crafts dazzling performance pieces — visualized on stage, in concerts, in films, on records and in books. And the sweep of her performance art is enormous.

On the move

It's hard to pin down exactly what Anderson does, and she likes it that way. She's constantly moving from one project to another and recycling and reinventing old ideas.

"It gets a little confusing sometimes," says Anderson of the process. "If I'm working all day in the studio on a bass line, then it's really great to be able to switch to video and see what I

can pull out of that."

Her current tour, in support of the new book, is a pared-down affair in comparison to the razzle-dazzle of the multi-media performance events she staged during the '80s.

"This show is going to be like a mental movie. That's how I describe it," says Anderson, 47. "I'm going to read sections of the book and, of course, I can't just leave it at that. I'm bringing keyboards, a violin, some electronics."

The violin is a new one. A custom Steinberger that she's still testing. It has five strings and is shaped like a bow. "It's like bowing a bow," she says. Then she processes it with electronics and makes it sound like a guitar.

Without the usual truckload of stage props, Anderson's one-woman show will focus on words and spoken language, two of the things that interest her most. (Anderson's first recording since 1989 is expected this summer. Titled "Bright Red" and coproduced by Brian Eno, she is also planning a full-fledged multi-media tour this fall to coincide with the album release.)

Personal tales

It's fun to listen to Anderson, as much for her idiosyncratic cadences as the content of her stories. Many of the topics she covers are personal, like tales about traveling in foreign countries.

And she is a keen observer and commentator, with a wry sense of humor, wrestling with questions about

American popular culture and coming up with fresh, if sometimes oblique, perspectives.

A one-time shy Midwesterner, she is no longer afraid to present her opinion of anything. In her current show, she flashes back to the Persian Gulf War. "The thing that, of course, struck me about it most, was that it was another trade show," she says. "It was a lot about displaying American technology. As we found out in retrospect, a lot of it didn't in fact work. But the image was of this power, and the link of power with technology is very interesting to me."

What's interesting about Anderson to her fans, is her willingness to share.

"She's a teacher. She's an educator and she just wants to share her experiences," says Ron Aldrich of Grosse Pointe Park, a longtime fan. "Laurie is one of those kitchen table people where you sit around all night and talk. . . She speaks on an intuitive level. She speaks with interior dialogue, and she has a great sense of humor."

Polished scrapbook

The text of Anderson's new book reads like a polished scrapbook, split into 50 chapters, full of stories, adventures, song lyrics, photos, sketches and more. It crisscrosses the time it covers, favoring a reader who would skip around between chapters rather than read it straight through.

It's also a self-examination, providing clues to the motives, missions and themes of her artistry. Themes that

continually surface include dreams, utopia, nature, vision, hearing, technology and the politics and culture of the United States.

"I papered a room with all the themes," says Anderson. "And I found surprises, like pyromania. It seemed to be a big thread that went through the book. . . As I try to say in the book, the electronics are modern fires and they have a lot to do with storytelling as well. Fire in the sense that fire is dangerous and destructive and attractive."

The book is quick to go behind-the-scenes, revealing much about the rationale and secrets of her work — like how she uses audio filters to create a variety of voices, or how she took apart violins, drums and other instruments and reinvented them for her own purposes.

"My main direction has always been, 'How do I tell a really good story?'" says Anderson. "That's always been what has interested me. So sometimes I think, 'Well, this story is better told with pictures. This one is better told with one drumbeat with some words in the background.' So I try to respect that and not turn everything into something that looks and sounds the same."

ON STAGE: Performance artist Laurie Anderson will read selections from her new book, "Stories from the Nerve Bible," at 7:30 p.m. Monday at the Michigan Theater, 603 E. Liberty in Ann Arbor. Reserved seats are \$15. Call 645-6666 anytime.